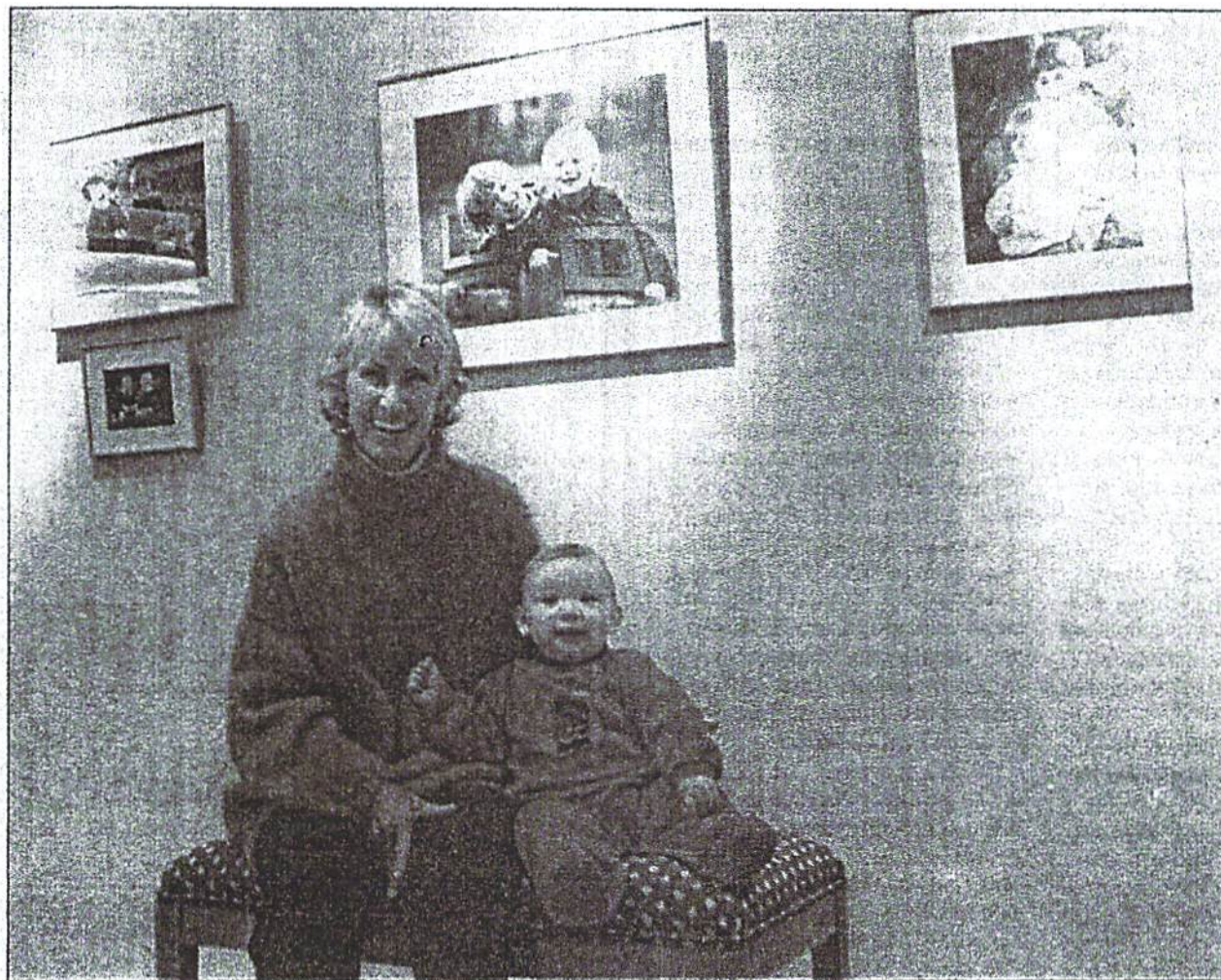


PEOPLE - JOHNSON

Photographs of children led volunteer to a new profession

Opportunity knocked for Duxbury's Deni Johnson



She answered call for volunteer photographer and found a profession

By Judith Montminy
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY - The Helen Bumpus Gallery in the Duxbury Free Library offers a welcome antidote to the winter doldrums, a feel-good exhibit of Deni Johnson's trademark photographs featuring adorable children.

In summer scenes by Duxbury Bay, Johnson captures the natural ease of children enjoying themselves, from the little girl gingerly lifting her skirt with glee as she wades into the water to the brother and sister grinning impishly, standing shoulder to shoulder with hands tucked into the pockets of their jeans.

"I love doing this," said Johnson, 53.

She started photographing children more than 20 years ago when her children's elementary school PTA drafted her to take publicity photographs for Duxbury's weekly newspaper. Johnson got the job, she said, "because I owned a Polaroid."

Although she has won several awards for her work, including an honorable mention in a Boston Globe competition during the mid 1970s, the Bumpus show is Johnson's first solo exhibit.

Her work was lauded by one judge for going beyond "the genre of kid photos and (producing) . . . a truly wonderful representation of childhood . . . one of the most difficult tasks a photographer can undertake."

Most of the 45 photographs in the Bumpus exhibit
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were done as commissions for area families. Some have been sold to Carr Frames and to the Stride Rite Shoes, which displays them at the Great Feet store in Natick.

Only three photographs in the exhibit, the portraits of Aerosmith's Steve Tyler and Joe Perry and an artistic shot of a Bartlett pear, are for sale.

Johnson said the pear shot, her one "artsy" photograph, was taken because she wanted to see if she could take a photo that did not have a child as the focus. When the pear piece was accepted into the Mid-Winter show at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, she had the affirmation she needed, she said. But when it came down to it, the photos she enjoyed taking the most were the ones that featured children, she said.

Johnson's children's photography career started by happenstance.

"In 1974 I started as the publicity volunteer for the Alden PTA," she said. Her children were ages 9, 7, 6, and 4 at the time.

"I never did photography before I started doing it then," she said.

She took a black-and-white photography course in Plymouth's adult education program and began taking photographs of children at school and at play. The volunteer experience eventually developed into her specialty as a photographer of childhood portraits and scenes.

"I had a good rapport with the kids," said Johnson, a firm believer in giving kids an opportunity to relax and get to know her before taking their pictures.

Johnson said she knew she was on the right track after she won an honorable mention in a Boston Globe photo contest with children as its theme.

"I thought, OK, I might be OK at this," she said of the mid-1970s contest.

As Johnson's children advanced through the school system, so did she, working her way up to taking photographs of high school students. When the Duxbury Clipper, the local weekly, had an opening for a photographer, Johnson was asked to take the position, one she continues to hold.

"That was my most scary thing, to be going on assignment," Johnson said. "Before, I just gave [publisher



"Emily and Christopher" photographed by Deni Johnson.

FYI

"Photographs by Deni Johnson" runs through March 1 at the Helen Bumpus Gallery in the Duxbury Free Library, 77 Alden St., Duxbury. Hours: Sunday 1-5 p.m., Monday through Wednesday 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Thursday 1-8 p.m., Friday and Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Call 781-934-2721.

John Cutler] the good stuff."

Johnson describes both the PTA publicity position and the Clipper assignment as opportunities that presented themselves because she was in the right place at the right time.

"I am a firm believer that when there is an opening in your life, something fills it," she said.

Her mushrooming business as a photographer for senior yearbook pictures also grew out of her volunteer work.

When her daughter Kristin was a senior in high school, Johnson started doing favors for her daughter's friends by photographing them for their yearbook portraits. Word spread and others started to ask her to take their photos as well. Before she knew it, Johnson said her senior pictures had grown into an annual

business with more than 200 portrait sittings between June and August, the prime time for backlit photos by the beach late in the afternoon.

The students that she photographs, once exclusively from Duxbury, now come from surrounding towns and from as far away as Dedham.

"I started slowly," said Johnson, who allows she has no marketing plan and most of her new business still comes through word-of-mouth.

Johnson continues to be a fixture at Duxbury school events, from the first day of kindergarten to high school graduation. To many students she is known as Deni, a nickname she grew up with, instead of her formal first name, Grace.

Johnson said she enjoys working with children and teenagers.

"It still is the one thing that keeps you young because you're around kids all the time," she said. "You start talking to them ... it gives you a different perspective on life."

Except for the Boston Globe contest, she enters her work only in Duxbury shows, where she has won several ribbons. The reason she does not venture farther, she said, is that she would have to spend more time keeping track of deadlines and entry forms, and less time taking the photographs she likes of children, especially of her 10-month-old grandson, Danny.

"It's a very upbeat, fun job," Johnson said. "I don't ever want it to become not fun."